Perestroika and the Destabilization of the Soviet monuments

Albert BOIME

On late Thursday night, 22 August 1991 - following the dissolution of the Russian putsch - thousands of jubilant celebrators marched to Red Square; the Kremlin, and Dzerzhinsky Square, hundred of demonstrators chanted slogans against the Communist Party and the KGB, threatening to storm the Lubyanka. To calm the angry crowd, Moscow mayor Gavril Popov agreed to remove the huge statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky (founder of the Cheka, forerunner of the KGB) from the square. In this case, the local leaders channeled anger into a constructive destructive act and thereby controlled the crowd's outrage. By midnight, heavy construction cranes were in place to lift the fourteen-ton statue from its massive pedestal as three thousand cheering spectators watched (Fig. 1). The first of many widely despised monuments of Communist heroes removed over the next few days had been overturned.

Immediately following the failed coup, the Western World’s imagination was captivated by the dismantling of the Dzerzhinsky and a number of other public monuments and sculptures including those of Lenin, Kalinin, and Iakov Sverdlov - all heroes of the Bolshevik revolution (Figs. 2, 3). Indeed, throughout Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet Union republics, either spontaneously, or in response to orders, people began removing images of Lenin as well as local national heroes linked to Leninism and Soviet politics from public view. In downtown Moscow one could witness ecstatic iconoclasts chipping pieces off the pedestals of the deposed monuments to Dzerzhinsky and Sverdlov, with throngs of people posing at the feet of former heroes. These were the days of "the downfall of statues." The idols of stone and bronze were humiliated, knocked down off the vertical and either carried off to the dump or piled up for horizontal display in a public site. The goal of the crowd that attacked the statues seemed clear: to reclaim the former totalitarian spaces of Moscow and invest them with a new signification, to transform them into public spaces of open negotiation and exposition.

The construction of official monuments inevitably involves assertions about the preservation of historical memory, the visualization of ideology in the public realm, the legitimation of existing authority, and the semiotics of social identity. Their destruction challenges these assertions by unmasking the embodied aims of permanence, memory, and authority and by implicating these emblems of stability momentarily in the transitoriness of everyday life. Statue-breaking attests to the impermanence of hertofore supposedly permanent regimes and hence its physical as well as metonymic relevance to historical change.

I argue in this paper that statue-breaking is both anti-tradition and, in the case of the ex-Soviet Union, anti-totalitarian. Although iconoclasm may be an expression of illegitimate or despotic authority (witness the Fascist destruction of artifacts for political ends) or even of individual acts of image-defacing, my study here assumes a group attack on the symbols of tyranny. Since public monuments help forge a unifying experience in hierarchic societies (and there are no others in the modern world) and are essential to the self-esteem and social identity of regional and national communities, the demolition of monuments serves the same purpose as their erection. The act of destruction represents the shedding of the old social skin in relationship to a discredited
ancient regime and constitutes a regeneration of the social self in relationship to the collectivity.

This new self must then be realized in a different kind of representation, one that now seeks to establish links with some imagined past, freshly interpreted, that preserves personal and collective nostalgia. Although the sense of unlimited potentiality and momentary euphoria that accompanies release from authoritarian rule would seem to provoke visions of a resplendent future, the dream must be historically justified by a radical reinterpretation of the recent nightmare. The desire for self-immortality is so powerful that it is unlikely that monument-making for the sake of historical amnesia as well as of memory will ever disappear as a form of human accomplishment.2

Public monuments are the visible coordinates of a regime's power, and each change in regime requires a new set of symbols. Some monumental icons seem to defy this principle and outlast old regimes, but this speaks to their signifying role in popular culture or to their capacity to undergo successive reinterpretations or recodings in new systems over time. In the purpose of the public monument is to commemorate and of the official state-sponsored monument to inscribe official monumental disruptions that history and opens it up to a more inclusive interpretation for the wider community.

Ideally, the opportunity would present itself to create out of the old public space an authentic public life where the competing rights and interests of different groups were at least recognized. Although for future leaders the destruction is tied to their desire to efface history and start with a clean slate, the transition phase involves the clash of competing ideas within the public realm. The fractured or newly-absent public monument is a sign of this evolving social as well as political identity.

The symbolic erasure of the oppressive past is not only a therapeutic action but a manifest sign of readiness to grasp new human possibilities. The public collaboration in statue-breaking or removal is a concrete expression of participation in historical change, more direct than passively experiencing the alteration of site names. How else explain the willingness of the impoverished citizens of the ex-Soviet Union and its client states to sustain the expenses involved in the wrecking and hauling away of the statues? Although the sense of change achieved through the dismantling of statuary may in the long run prove illusory, there is a momentary feeling of self-realization in the collective act - a projection of a larger vision and hope through consensus.

A broken statue may well be a more authentic index of popular political sensibility than a new monument erected by the succeeding government. May we now expect a monument ordered under Yeltsin to commemorate his putsch against the Russian Parliament and its unconstitutional dissolution as the first step on the long road to building "democracy"? More likely, Yeltsin will want to record his role in the August 1991 coup, perhaps representing himself atop a tank - an ironic reprise of the image of Lenin standing on an armored car. Yeltsin however, may have difficulty explaining away the fact that

he then enjoyed the support of the same parliamentary "hardliners" who were so recently ousted. Or perhaps there are plans for replicas of the two White Houses in Washington and Moscow surmounted by a statue of a cherubic Yeltsin atop a tall column; after all, he has the blessing of the entire Western establishment headed by Bill Clinton himself. Evidently, Clinton is ready to let democracy and legality fade in importance on the assumption that Yeltsin's authoritarian role is the best bet for keeping Russia safe for capitalism and international finance.3

All of this may have been anticipated in the West's reception of the iconoclasm that attended the failure of the August coup. The complexities of the statue-mania were glossed over in favor of a broad symbolic association of the collapse of Soviet Communism and the toppling of the statues. It is thus altogether unsurprising that the U. S. mainstream media remains complicit with the official government line that supports Yeltsin's recent attack on the unfolding democratic process in Russia. They continue to frame the conflict as a dramatic clash of the contending forces of democracy and despotism, with the former deputies in parliament cast as the villains, otherwise known as "die-hard Communists and nationalists". This time the majority of Russians stood on the sidelines, perhaps stultified by Yeltsin's authoritarian repression and the sense of an impending crackdown on independents and trade unionists. So much for energy expended on tearing down statues of ex-Soviet tyrants.

Of course, I do not wish to appear naive in pointing out the hypocrisy of our establishment and the subservience of our press. Yet Eastern Europe was the one area where the illusion may have still worked. The West paraded there as the ally of the downtrodden, the protector of Polish workers and the Russian victims of the gulag. It is this myth that vanished into thin air when the tanks began shelling Moscow's White House. It may just be that in the long run popular democracy is even more threatening to so-called democratic states whose governing elites fear mass participation as despotism from below. But if we are determined to impose capitalism by any means, we will never be able to achieve our objective with a genuine consensus of the various competing interests. So we opt for some kind of iron fist, for a czar of sorts, and in that case the toppling of statues may be a portent for the fall of the hollow icons on our side as well.

To clarify my discussion of the process of monument iconoclasm I will use the following terms: monument inversion, monument subversion, and monument conversion. The first category refers to collective crowd action in overturning monuments during times of drastic political change, when there is a sense of self-renewal and an acceptance of
present uncertainty in the faith that the future can be controlled. The second is related to official overthrow of the history of the recent past, what the new ruling elite wants everyone to forget (including its previous complicity with the old regime). This also includes the iconoclasm of anti-democratic forces whose elimination of democratic symbols is predicated on a New Order given to revisionist history. Unlike the idolatry of authoritarian symbols, however, the democratic or republican effigies - say a Washington or a Lincoln, for examples - merely engender respect at best. Hence their destruction lacks the liberating energies of symbols that aroused extremes of hatred or blind obedience. The third and final category implies the salvaging of the monument or its fragments by recoding and recycling them in a different historical interplay between the past, present and future. Here the political message may be obsolete, but the historical message is still unfolding in a special space organized for study and contemplation. One earlier example is that of the Abbé Henri Grégoire’s defense of the conservation of the statues of the kings during French Revolution on the grounds that these “symbols of oppression” could be transformed “into permanent reminders of tyranny, forcing them to become a kind of permanent pillory”. A more recent instance of this recontextualization are the proposed theme parks for the exhibition of the collapsed statuary, as in the case of Budapest. Although all my categories overlap to some extent and are purer than anything found in actuality, I believe that they furnish us a useful tool or characterizing modern iconoclasm.

In the latest case of statuemania, the historical context and regional divisions gave a coherence to the vandalism as a sustained political act. The act repeats an ancient tradition addressing the changed status and meanings of public works of art.Ironically, the opening shot did not occur in the Soviet Union but in Ethiopia, on the occasion of the overthrow of President Mengistu Haile Mariam. Mengistu, who had held power for seventeen years, fled once his Communist regime began to collapse in the face of the insurgency. One of the key events in the recognition of the demise was the pulling down of the fifty-foot high statue of Lenin by government construction crews (Fig. 4). The colossal statue, marking out the space known as Lenin Square in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, was given by the Russians in the 1984 to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Ethiopian revolution. (The workers dislodged a plaque declaring the statue as a gift from the Soviet people - just like the Statue of Liberty, a political token from one elite group to another, was falsely supposed to have been a gift from the people of France.)

Although students began to scrawl political graffiti on the legs of the statue prior to its tearing down, the act itself was not initiated “spontaneously” by the people but by the government. Thousands of Ethiopians poured into the streets to celebrate the event, however, and watched with rapt fascination as it came down by ropes attached to the statue’s shoulders and waist and drilling by jackhammers into the reinforced concrete base. Yet the government clearly meant this to be a major political event, coinciding with its release of political prisoners. In orchestrating the bringing down of the statue and declaring amnesty for the group of prisoners, the new government attempted to distance itself from the old to pick up popular support and strengthen its hand in peace talks scheduled the following week in London. That this had its intended impact is seen in the statement of one western diplomat who welcomed both acts as a demonstration of “the sincerity of their commitment to reform”.

The event certainly contained ingredients of catharsis of the crowds who witnessed the toppling
of the statue. One bystander, a thirty-two year old municipal planner, declared: “That statue is not symbol of Socialism. It’s a symbol of exploitation and bad leaders. Maybe now people will begin to forget the anger we all have inside when we don’t have to see Lenin every day.” What I believe he implies here is that the public space has now been redefined to match the psychology of the crowd. The statue of Lenin defined the public space in alienating and repressive terms and with its removal the space - not the individual represented nor the ideology he repre-
sented - was affected. It is less a question of sympathetic magic than of opening the public sphere through monument inversion. Her the government read the citizens correctly in allowing them to participate in an event that coincided with change. Accordingly, Christian churches and Muslim mosques were overflowing with worshippers who now saw the possibilities of a return to total freedom of religion.\textsuperscript{6}

One case study that almost defies categorization is the recent disruption of the monumental image by Vera Mukhina, \textit{The Worker and the Collective Farm Woman} - the symbolic centerpiece of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics’s Pavilion at the Paris International Exposition of 1937 (Fig. 5). The colossal partnership of the two figures, each carrying one component of the national emblem of hammer and sickle, harmonizes to create the cosmic national blending of male and female, rural and urban, peasant and worker, embodying the highest political and aesthetic ideals of the Soviet Union at that moment. Here the structure of the monument is an allegorical presentation of the concept of “from each according to his/her ability, to each according to his/her need”. Yet Mukhina’s group, representing the enthusiasm and optimism of youth and youth’s idealism, was put to the service of a program that expressed, in the words of the organizer of the Soviet pavilion, Boris Ternovets, “the idea of efficiency and powerful growth, of the invincible movement of the Soviet Union along the path of conquests and victories.” It was a synthetic construction supported by an ideology that inevitably could not sustain itself.

The mischievous contemporary dissident Soviet artist Afrika, who thumbed his nose at censorship authorities and the official Soviet art world, created a project that directly attacked this work, \textit{Donald destruction} - made explicitly for consumption in the West (Fig. 6). It began as an act of wanton vandalism. Afrika and a friend travelled to Moscow, where they removed a door panel from the inner thigh of the female half of Mukhina’s monument that now stands in front of the pavilion of the building of Achievements of the National Economy of the ex-USSR. Whisked back to Leningrad, the steel door became fetishized into an entity called “Agent”, which was incorporated into an installation of sculptures, collages, drawings and paintings that link Le-
nin, Lenin’s Tomb, the Taj Mahal, McDonald’s, Donald Duck and Trump Tower in a vast conspiracy narrative. My capsule reading of this complicated allegory is that Communism and Capitalism needed each other to maintain control over their respective domestic realms.

Sooner or later, the ramifications of this global symbiosis were destined to doom both world powers to obsolescence, but, as it turned out, capitalism was more efficient at building a war machine and satisfying the domestic front, and the Soviet Union bit the dust first. The Western industrial nations needed symbolic imagery to persuade their peoples of the triumph of their ideology, and the new Russian _privilegenisia_ that had deserted Gorbachev for moving too slowly towards capitalism happily provided them. As dismantled statues, Soviet icons can now clamor for the status of consumer items. One resident of Kiev went around buying up all the Lenin statuettes, pins, and paintings for the Western art market at the time of the dismantling of the Lenin statue there, concluding that there would be a vast international demand for Bolshevik souvenirs now that the Party was dissolved. On 24 October 1992, a crowd of three thousand Russian citizens gathered in the October Place near one of the surviving Lenin statues to protest Yeltsin’s drive to capitalism; one complaint was that the holy icons of the churches were being sold to foreigners to pay for privatization. There are ironic parallels between the selling of the state’s patrimony, the loss of the religious aura of the icons and the loss of the political aura of the monuments.
annihilation”.¹⁰ What they were proposing was a “creative collaboration” with the monuments to convert them into post-totalitarian “history lessons”. They were concerned that with each wave of iconoclasm in the evolution of Russian society, “it is history, the country’s true past, which is conveniently being obliterated.” Of course, Komar and Melamid knew full well the appeal of such a show to the West and it is not surprising that is was exhibited in the Courtyard Gallery of Manhattan’s World Financial Center - the seat of global capitalism.

Indeed, most of the entries were satirical including their own: they would convert the famous image of the gesturing Lenin into a hapless New Yorker trying to hail a cab, a joke that recently graced the cover of *The New Yorker.*¹¹ More dramatically they would salvage Lenin’s tomb with an electronic signboard that would flash messages including one that added the suffix “ISM” to Lenin’s name and convert it into a monument to a particular epoch rather than to an immortal idea. Constantin Boym, a Russian émigré living in New York, would alter existing monuments into monumental advertising schemes, and suggested that the Russian government lease the various Lenin statues to Western corporations for “a hefty hard-currency fee”. MacAdams, an American, would tear down the famous statue of Marx and Engels conversing, leaving in its place only the insubstantial “dialectical space” between them.

Komar and Melamid deliberately borrowed their theme from Lenin’s project entitled *Monumental Propaganda.* Originally addressed to Lunacharskii, commissar for education, Lenin’s plan was to create a “people’s” art, one that could integrate itself with everyday life, assisting in the ideological shaping of a new revolutionary mass consciousness. He argued that Monumental Propaganda should consist of provisionally-made statues, busts, or reliefs celebrating revolutionary individuals or events produced with cheap materials such as wood and plaster. They were to be temporary objects corresponding to the moment like journalistic reportage, and the embody didactic values for revolutionary celebrations such as May Day. Lenin’s strategy - just the opposite of the later cult statues made in his image - was to liberate monuments from their supernatural look of frozen solemnity and activate them as humanly accessible

7. *Art Spiegelman, Recuperated Worker and the Collective Farm Woman, manipulated photograph, 1993*
agencies advancing the progress of the revolution. Not designed for eternity but for eventual self-destruction, they partake of all three categories listed above. In a sense, Komar and Melamid pay homage to Lenin’s idea for temporary monuments that never exist long enough to outlast their topical significance. In the end, Lenin’s scheme was anti-traditional and, at the same time, diametrically opposed to the cultist ideals of Stalin’s totalitarian state.

Indeed, underlying Lenin’s project was his concept of a dynamic yet incomplete society always in the process of unfolding, continually striving for self-renewal until the emancipation of the least of its members. This notion runs contrary to the Totalitarian Utopia, where perfection lies within the will of the Leader and is therefore imminently realizable. The visual for this ideal are permanence and impersonality - the characteristics of the Stalinist idols of stone and bronze. Thus the toppling of the statues remained squarely within the anti-traditional plan of Lenin.

Just as the fallen image of authority symbolically tells us about the loss of authority, so images representing authority yield valuable insights into the nature of the actual authority producing it. Political representation has a double signification, in first projecting the physical persona of the revered leader, and secondly in constructing an ideological community of shared interests. This entails finding a from that mediates between the corporeal person and transcendent icon. Movement and energy is therefore generally inappropriate for official political representation, as is clear from the monuments to Lenin, Stalin, and Dzerzhinsky (Fig. 8). Most are concealed beneath long heavy coats that transform them into monumental columnar objects. Here the leader is is divested of individual or personal characteristics and transformed into allegory and deified. Such rhetoric of political representation is of necessity conservative, yet eminently suited for authoritarian regimes constituted by the all-powerful leader. One effect of the omnipotent head of the police state is the internalizing of controls, symbolized by the ubiquitous images of illegitimate political authority. They stand as constant reminders of the guilt of accommodation, of having to denounce to prevent being denounced in turn. The intimidated and guilty citizen

8. Evgenii Vuchetich, Monument to Felix Dzerzhinsky, Moscow

is excluded from this metaphorical formulation through the absence of suggestion of the leader’s dependence or sense of responsibility for their interests, exactly as in the case of a religious icon. In this sense, the so-called public space defined by the statue was a fiction and more akin to the sacred than to the public. Only during the August putsch, when the terrains marked out by the statues had to be contested by live bodies did the notion of public space assume some validity. Thus step towards symbolic dismemberment and breaking of the leader, who is the macrocosm of one’s microcosm, is fraught with the powerful floodtide of emotions when monument inversion occurs and the world turns upside down. The moment of destruction of the symbols of illegitimate authority is tantamount to laying the groundwork for a vibrant future.

The Austrian art historian, Alois Riegl, defended the bourgeois tradition at the end of the last cen-
tury in declaring that a monument’s historical purpose is to keep alive the deeds or events of a single individual or a nation in the minds of future generations. As such, it is intimately connected with collective memory within a given culture. Public commemoration is a form of history-making, but shifting political discourses are at work to revise, supplement, and efface history. The repression of the KGB was only too real, but the memory is too painful to bear if your friends or relatives disappeared in Lubyanka prison. The memory constructed by the original monument had to be destroyed or otherwise displayed as a relic of some bygone age. Both the erection and toppling of sculptures produce meaning related to the nation’s historical memory.

 Destruction of effigies, as we know, confirms a previous state of their worship; it is not just an expression of moral illiteracy but of an unresolved feeling of guilt spilling out and clamoring for immediate victims. The participation of citizens and local leaders in the ritual destruction of the symbols of an outworn regime has a long history, perhaps most vividly embodied in the destruction of the Vendôme Column in April 1871 by the French Commune. Ironically, the Bolsheviks - and most notably, Lenin - profoundly admired the Commune from whence they derived their red banner and model for a proletarian revolution. The impermanence of national monuments designed to perpetuate the deeds of heroic actions to inspire loyalty and coherence is one of the vagaries of art history. Even when the monument is seen in the process of installation it seems as provisional as those that are demolished, as is seen in the case of the erection of the Iwo Jima memorial in Washington, D.C. (Fig. 9). One of Komar and Melamid’s proposals was for a statue to be left dangling from cranes in the air arresting the moment of dismantlement and “extending it into eternal retribution”. Although in its definitive place the monument assumes the aura of its environment and becomes fixed in the national memory, the erection of a statue and its demolition signal the power of the state to reify visual experience. Like a flag, a national monument is simply a mass of fragile material endowed with meaning by force of arms or the power of propaganda.

On Dzerzhinsky Square without Dzerzhinsky and Sverdlov Square without Sverdlov, it suddenly dawned on Soviet citizens that the statues they had revered, even feared, had suddenly become demystified. This is not a novel experience in revolutionary iconoclasm, as seen in a recent paper by my colleague László Beke on “The Demolition of Stalin’s Statue in Budapest.” The bronze colossus was the site of major political spectacles and pledges were made in front of it, but when toppled someone scrawled the letters “W.C.” on the statue’s head. An essay in a recent issue of kritische berichte recounts how the author passed the colossal red granite statue of Lenin ion East Berlin every day for twenty years, straining not to look at it and yet almost always feeling emotionally provoked by it. But with the destruction of the wall it became merely a ”stony” monument which had lost its hold over her. In the case of toppling and decapitation of the East Berlin monument, there was a curious switch: defenders of the statue attached a banner across Lenin’s chest with the inscription, “Keine Gewalt” - No Power. In this instance it was the municipal authorities - forging ties with the West - who ordered the monument’s subversion and wished to replace its symbolic history with “deutsch-deutsche Geschichte”. Those who protested its removal with the banner wished to safeguard and convert the monument by declaring its neutrality.

One of the ingenious schemes for conversion in the Komar and Melamid exhibition was John Murray’s idea to bury the statues of former leaders
(Fig. 10). Only their head and shoulders would be exposed above ground, thereby demystifying their former exalted status by putting spectators on the same level. For those nostalgic for the old relation, a subterranean viewing chamber could be carved out, attainable by stairs, where spectators could once again confront mainly feet. Heretofore the power of the monuments was reinforced by secret police and the internalization of guilt. Formerly the crowd itself had assumed repressive functions under the aegis of the statues treated as sacred: the KGB (Dzerzhinsky), the Party (Lenin), the Soviets (Sverdlov), and Industry (Dzerzhinsky, Lenin).

The Cult of Lenin

Actually, since 1989 Lenin statues were being sporadically knocked down in several republics as millions of people quit the increasingly discredited Communist Party. This constituted a dramatic overthrow of the Lenin mystique and paved the way for the iconoclastic acts of August 1991. The Russian revolution undermined the existing social order and the unstable transition period of reconstruction in all the realms of existence required new symbols to confer meaning on the chaos - inevitable following a period of drastic political change. As the Communist party moved to dominate the political process, it increasingly centered its claims to legitimate rule on the idealization of Lenin as the revolution’s author and guiding force. The cult of Lenin crystallized around 1923, when illness had removed the leader from power and then assumed the status of a national religion immediately following his death the following year. As Tumarkin has written:

The full-blown cult of Lenin was an organized system of rites and symbols whose collective function was to arouse in the cult’s participants and spectators the reverential mood necessary to create an emotional bond between them and the party personified by Lenin. Stylized portraits and busts of Lenin were its icons, his idealized biography its gospel, and Leninism its sacred writings. Lenin corners were local shrines for the veneration of the leader, and its central shrine was the mausoleum in Red Square displaying Lenin’s preserved remains. This formalized veneration of Lenin persisted until the end of the

1920s, when the emerging cult of Stalin began slowly to eclipse it.  

Although as a complex of standardized texts and symbols the cult targeted the mass of the Russian people and served the needs of the Soviet state, it revealed parallels to that of other political cultural experiments bent on replacing the sign system of the previous regime with its own representative emblems of identification and unification. Further, it bears a specific relationship to the traditional concept of the king’s two bodies, the mortal body subject to the frailties of nature and the political body that could not be seen but could be experienced in perpetuity through representation. Finally, the Russian tradition of venerating icons and the remains of their canonized religious martyrs and saints may have predisposed the Russian people to a cult of representation such as that organized around the idealized image of Lenin.

The object of the cult is an immortal Lenin who personifies the Communist Party and is the author of the guiding line to socialism. Thus the symbol was made to order for destruction during the breakup of the Soviet Union and glasnost. Not only was there the cathartic act of simply destroying something hated, but in the case of Lenin’s cult image there were
specific political implications insofar as it allegorized the ascendancy of Communism and had become a signifier of oppression. Lenin had been a metonymic sign for the inevitable victory of the Communist Party; his cult signified invincibility and immortality - at least the system of ideas his effigy perpetuated and embodied. Hence the need to topple Lenin once support was withdrawn - to dispense with the idea of his invincibility and to literally bring him down to earth. The positive ideas that Lenin also embodied - his call for the rising and raising up of the oppressed, for perpetual striving towards emancipation, for the final victory of the proletariat - perhaps they also had to be suppressed in the New World Order. The need the destroy images is never merely wanton or wasteful. The toppling of hated symbol is part of self-hatred as well - the idea that one could be coerced or intimidated by representations of a political system. The previous passive acceptance of the condition of things is now a subject of self-detestation projected outwardly on to the hollow icon. Not surprisingly, this insecure state intensifies close to the end: those with some privilege see their power and advantages threatened, some fear the loss of a comfortable paternalistic support system, and others fear chaos most of all. At the same time, Lenin’s comebackness as the terror of the tsars and of the capitalists made good copy in the Western press and may have been encouraged from above as a sop to the Western nations.

Following Lenin’s death in 1924 and the political exploitation of national mourning (which brought about a power struggle within the ruling troika of Stalin, Trotsky and Zinoviev), the construction of statues of Lenin was ordered for Moscow, Kharkov, Tiflis, Minsk, Tashkent, and Leningrad (formerly Petrograd). As was stated at the Second All-Union Congress that adopted this resolution, “The image of our great leader must be immortalized for all future generations and should serve as a permanent reminder and call to the struggle for the ultimate victory of communism.” The object was to substitute for a ruler a cult predicated on the preservation of the memory of the ruler and hence his or her continuing vital energy in the lives of citizens. Le roi est mort. Vive le roi! This was also achieved through the mourning rite, carried out as spectacle and the preservation of Lenin’s embalmed body. A competition for a mausoleum design inspired numerous ideas, including a 15 to 20 story-high statue of Lenin that would house meeting halls for higher government institutions. The inauguration of the chosen project in 1930 was associated with Soviet engineering and the accomplishments of Stalin’s Five-Year Plan. The propaganda began in the schools and pursued the citizen throughout her or his lifetime. Every classroom displayed Lenin’s portrait, texts carried illustrations of Lenin surrounded by adoring children, and the mythology surrounding him was perpetuated by such projects as essay papers on ways to honor his memory.

But as Stalin consolidated his power, the cult of Lenin subsided and that of his successor arose. The index to this development could be statistically demonstrated through representations: by 1933, it was reported that the number of portraits of Stalin outnumbered those of Lenin in Moscow by almost two-to-one. The cult of Stalin culminated in apotheosis in 1953 when in March he joined Lenin in the Lenin-Stalin Mausoleum. Just a few years later, however, with his famous “secret speech” delivered at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist party, Nikita Khrushchev effectively destroyed the Stalin cult and launched a new Lenin cult to replace it. De-Stalinization proceeded apace with neo-Leninism, reaching a climax in 1961 when Stalin disappeared from public display and Lenin’s statue was being produced in mass quantities for distribution throughout the Eastern bloc and its allies.

Social Realists had canonized and dogmatized Stalin’s claim: “Life has become easier, life has become happier.” The Romanian sculptor Dimitrios Demou tells the story of his famous statue of Stalin that had to wear a benign smile to express an optimism that in fact did not exist. It is precisely the false of rather mystifying features of social realism that made these statues hollow icons whose validity could obtain only as long as they could be maintained by threat of force. Once the force was removed, the hollowness of their pretense was immediately apparent and hence had no legitimate claim to existence. The skin of a happy man, of happy tractors and airplanes, is stretched over the skeleton of propaganda. Social Realists practiced a literary style with
a conventionally coded iconography. This made it easy then to attack its iconography with the blunt edge of a sledgehammer or have it pulled down by a mechanical crane.

The Lenin Cult that resurfaced in post-Stalinist Russia to become the symbolic focus of international Communism served as the historical touchstone for the unstable regimes that followed in the wake of Stalin’s death. The regenerated Lenin cult, however, differed from the old one with its genre-like adaptations. Now he came to figure as a colossal columnar statue, towering over a public square and used for ceremonial and festive occasions. When Leonid Brezhnev took over Khrushchev’s job in 1964, he took advantage of the jubilee celebration of Lenin’s birth to shore up his strength in the party. On 16 April 1970, Brezhnev traveled to the city of Ulianovsk (formerly Simbersk) to preside over the formal opening of the grand Lenin Memorial built for the occasion. He also delivered a major speech commemorating the event on 21 April to the Central Committee, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, and the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Republic, standing against the backdrop of an enormous profile of Lenin’s head. The standing ovation Brezhnev received concluded with a formula derived from Maiakovsky’s 1924 poem: “Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live!”

Yet one must be careful in assigning too much power to inanimate objects, even if symbolically they point indexically to the authority behind them. The centennial hardly achieved its hoped-for results, and even created backlash of sentiment against the excessive attention to the leader. The many jokes and quips making the rounds in the popular domain indicated that the Lenin cult was already becoming the object of ridicule. A department store selling beds for newlyweds advertised a bed for three, since “Lenin is always with us”. A widely circulated anecdote - rumored to be a favorite among Moscow and Leningrad intelligentsia - described the results of an official contest for the best statue of Alexander Pushkin: third prize went to a statue of Pushkin reading Lenin; second prize, to a statue of Pushkin reading Lenin; and the first prize was awarded to a statue of Lenin! But perhaps the best story illustrating Soviet self-awareness tells of an elder citizen unsuccessful-ly seeking an apartment - all of his letters to the bureaucracy remaining unanswered. Finally, in desperation he goes directly to the Central Committee and demands to see Lenin in person. “Lenin?” exclaims the astonished receptionist, “but Lenin died in 1924!” “How come,” the old man replies, “when you need him he’s alive, but when I need him, he’s dead?”

It would seem that the monuments had already lost the magical aura and sanctity of legitimation. Nevertheless, the mausoleum continued to be a place of pilgrimage for large number visitors. It became the focal point of state ritual, especially during the celebration of revolutionary holidays. It also served as an official spiritual center. Soviet cosmonauts gathered there before and after space flights, and it was customary for newlyweds to lay flowers outside the mausoleum immediately after their weddings. The demeanor of visitors was serious and respectful, like visitors to the Vietnam Memorial. All the investment of their childhood energy in revering Lenin and the idealizing rhetoric surrounding the cult was somehow dashed in the glasnost period, much like Americans coming of age in the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam war and their attendant reaction. If so, the attack on the statues became a form of self-flagellation for having been so gullible, end even fearfully so.

In Bucharest, a cleric held up a cross against the offensive bronze statue of Lenin just removed by a crane from Piatia Scinteli in the center of the city. The cleric himself occupied the granite pedestal where previously the statue had stood, proposing himself as a pious surrogate for an atheistic symbol. The cleric symbolically alluded to emancipation from the former tyranny that the statue represented. It has been argued that public monuments are normally invisible objects that become visible suddenly during moment of drastic political upheaval. Recoded in changed political conditions, they become silent scapegoats permitting a collective catharsis. Yet this so-called sudden “visibility” is a misnomer; it is there hovering in the background of a landscape (like an electrically charged field) exactly as it hovers in the background of our imagination - acting as a brake on it or a liberating mechanism, depending on our ideological orientation. It frames the consciousness, setting the perimeters to our thinking, policing us
with its representation of the social order. Even as in the case of an allegory such as the Statue of Liberty or the Marine Corps Memorial, our sense of history is being selectively arranged for us. In this sense, the contestation for a public space begins by tearing down the statues that delineate it. It is not only an attack on the ancient regime but an attack on those signposts of the state that oppress us even in the most benign of circumstances. Certainly, it is cathartic to spit in the stony or bronze face of a hated individual - or vandalize an image with graffiti - but the bringing down of a three-dimensional marker that mapped out a public space means also that the act represents an attempt to free oneself from self-imposed limitation, to break through a shell of indoctrination that defines and control one’s freedom to move through the public space.

As previously suggested, destroying the cult image paradoxically points to the power of that image ultimately attests to “an immense respect” for the image. Actually, any act of vandalism always confirms the recognition of the ideological centrality of the icon but without necessarily suggesting respect. It is an acknowledgement that the work radiates a charismatic aura, but that it has failed to live up to the promises of its rhetorical script. For not only does it radiate authority, it radiates the aura of the Good Father who embodies protection and benevolence for his extended family. No statue proclaims its tyrannical or despotic hold on its public, rather it speaks out to future generations to act with the same boldness, intelligence, and national concern of the subject of the statue. The force of the state can make its fiction history, but when the regime falters and the statue is standing contradiction of the rhetoric surrounding it then it constitutes a negation of its state meaning. Thus the statue of Rodin’s Thinker in front of the Cleveland Museum of Art was bombed when a member of a surrounding ghetto decided that the culture it represented was more concerned with preserving objects than lives. Inevitably, builders of public monuments cover up crimes against the public by selecting their narratives that leave out the violence that inspired them or substitute for the real heroes one necessitated by the state’s ideology. What keeps the monument in place, is the power of the privileged minority that profits from narrative. But a monument in a public space cannot be limited to a single meaning and its attempt to suppress certain forms of historical occurrences and ideas ultimately means betraying its narrow concerns. The reality and is allowed the opportunity to publicly proclaim it is it possible to agitate against the significations of the monument.

The Soviet Union having failed dismally in its search for a shortcut to socialism, Russia is now seeking an equally spectacular shortcut to capitalism. We might understand the government’s program as a Five-Year Plan for the Rebuilding of the Bourgeoisie, and in the propaganda only the terms will have changed. As one Soviet primer of 1930 put it:

After socialism is built there will no longer be dwarfs - people with exhausted, pale faces, people reared in basements without sunshine or air. Healthy, strong giants, red-cheeked and happy - such will be the new people.

For this new people new cities would have to be built, entirely different from the gloomy and crowded cities whose center is a fortress or Kremlin:

From the central square, like the rays of the sun, avenues and boulevards will radiate in all directions. Buildings will not stand in a row like soldiers, all facing one way. Each dwelling will turn toward the sun in order to get as much light as possible. White house-communes, schools, libraries, hospitals will be surrounded with flower beds. At every entrance you will be greeted by green giants - oaks, pines, linden trees.

Presumably, the central square would have had as its dominant focus the paternalistic effigy of Lenin.

The old Five-Year Plan was a vision of infinite possibilities just as now the nomenklatura of privileged elite makes claims for an utopian world growing out of privatization. But the question for the new regime is the role the state is to play in the construction of classic capitalism. Yeltsin now knows that his economic policies have caused widespread discontent, that the money for restructuring must come from domestic swindlers and foreign speculators whose interests do no coincide with those of the Russian people. The marketers know that reforms cannot be
conducted too rigorously for fear of evoking resistance from society of undermining confidence in the path that has been chosen.

Is it the drastic and abrupt overthrow of the revolutionary birthright of the people that is expressed in the throwing down of the statues. Just as the original Five-Year Plan wanted to overhaul in an abbreviated period the old social order and required its symbols of optimism, so now the urge to private ownership of property requires some concrete manifestation of change to mark the transition. But lacking a positive program and a mass base, this need has been expressed negatively in the overturning of the old cheery symbols and authority heroes of the past. It was the sudden break in political and cultural continuity that both gave rise to the Lenin cult and to its demise in the perestroika and glasnost years.

The present Russian government is still unable to invent a set of visual symbols to complement its effacement of the old, as in the case of the removal of the statues, the revival of the pre-revolutionary flag, the excision of the once pervasive hammer and sickle from its official signage, and the change of names of municipal and state sites. But even these token gestures carry a certain amount of certitude and conviction that substitutes for the agonizing period of transition and confusion. The toppling of the statues is an act involving the collaboration of the government and its people, thus creating the momentary illusion that there is harmony between them.

This also plays well for the international press that sustains the illusion of a common set of interests of both government and the masses of Russian people. Shortly after the August coup, Gorbachev and Yeltsin united to urge the adoption of a new governing structure for the Soviet Union, based on the resurgent power of the its constituent republics. Gorbachev stated to the Congress of People’s Deputies: “Let me tell you, the West is watching. If we are to coordinate, unite within the new forms, find new structures, new people, the West will support us”. The most conspicuous expression of this restructuring was the knocking down of the Lenin monuments. Indeed, the toppling of the statues quickly became the central visual metaphor for the very process of perestroika, dismantling and restructuring, especially after the coup. The seizing upon the toppling of the statues as a front-page item in the major U.S. papers attests to the clear legibility of the act as a sign of the destruction of the Communist regime and the beginning of a new government based on privatization. Thus the U.S. press exploited these events to symbolize the victory of the Western industrial nations, even though the absence of a new sign system left the actual outcome in doubt. Only in the case of the Chinese student rebellion in Tiananmen Square was there anything approximating a new emblem produced, and this was modeled after a well known American icon (The Statue of Liberty). Thus Americans could be convinced that lying behind the rubble of the Berlin Wall and the razed sites in Eastern Europe were the haunting specters of capitalism.

Yet even here there was fear of the crowd and its unpredictability. A New York Times journalist reporting on the projected dismantling of the Lenin statue in Kiev observed condescendingly that at “Lenin’s feet [there] was a happy crowd that only Bruegel could have painted: ordinary people leering up at the great figure and gesturing mockingly”. A reporter for the Los Angeles Times repeatedly referred to the “intoxicated” crowds tearing down statues in derogatory terms even while praising the act itself. To him it was an Albanian “mob” that “clawed down a statue of Enver Hoxha with their bare hands,” while in the Polish town of Nowa Huta “delirious protesters” attacked a Lenin monument. These contradictory sentiments suggest a fear about the dissenting crowds within American society itself, conjuring up the nightmarish vision of
hordes of students and workers pouring into the streets such as happened in South Central Los Angeles in the summer of 1992. Although no special monument or category of monument was singled out, the nature of the buildings targeted for attack was primarily entrepreneurial and dependent on the local clientele for business. This suggests a political act and plan, analogous to that which existed in the squares of the East European urban sites. While in this case there was a distinctly cathartic element to this destruction, as in the case of the toppling of the statues a suffering people signaled an alarm to their leadership. As long as a privileged elite chooses to ignore the alarm, there will be a fresh round of statue-toppling and/or destruction of the symbols of oppression.

Yeltsin himself may soon provide an excellent case study: in Klin, a small town 50 miles outside Moscow, a group of elderly women were overheard discussing the confusion following the August coup. One 70-year old pensioner recalled that everything seemed up in the air until she saw Yeltsin appearing on television, standing on a balcony with his jacket unbuttoned and his fist raised in the air, “oy just like Lenin”. Her neighbor abruptly interjected: “Right, dear. Only let’s not speak of Lenin”. Popular heroes, like statues, are always ripe for a downfall, especially when exposed as hollow and naked. But the alternatives are never too clear: as long as societies need a patriarchal head yesterday’s villain may be recycled as tomorrow’s hero (Fig. 1I).

NOTES

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3 This was written before the December 1993 parliamentary elections which installed more extremist opposition forces in the new Parliament than there were in the one that Yeltsin disbanded. The elections showed that Russia is now utterly polarized, leading to the surprising emergence of an ultra-nationalist-Communist movement led by Vladimir Zhirinovsky. His calls for law and order and a crackdown on corruption appeal to millions of angry Russians fed up with Yeltsin’s extremist economic and political policies. The elections also represented a backlash against the intrusive U.S. role in Russia’s internal affairs: one of Zhirinovsky’s popular campaign planks was ridding Russia of American influences.

4 At this moment, an example of what Pierre Nora calls a "memory site" - a place where there is a struggle over a community’s tensions between its experience of the past (memory) and its organization of the past (history) - is perhaps seen in its most active and collective manifestation. - See NORAI, P.: Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire, Representations, No. 26, Spring 1989, pp. 7-25.


8 "Rettungsfront” gegen Jelzin. Frankfurter Allgemeiner Sonntagszeitung, October 25, 1992


10 KOMAR and MELAMID: What is to be Done with Monumental Propaganda? Artforum, vol. 30, May 1992, p. 102

11 The New Yorker, July 12, 1993


17 Ibid., pp. 156-157

18 Ibid., pp. 261-262

19 Ibid., pp. 263-264

Perestrojka a demontáž sovietských pamätníkov


Ak sa sochy predstavujúce mocných možu vziať do povahy týchto osobností, potom aj ich želaná deštrukcia sa môže vziať do povahy straty tejto moci. V tomto zmysle, autorove analyzy o likvidácii sôch majú ukázať ako sochy slúžia na oboje - legitimovať a delegitimovať autoritu, do tej miery, v akéhov sa socha pokúša reprezentovať ľudí, sociálnu triedu, politickú stranu, alebo veľkého národného hrdinu, ktorého telo je naplnené symbolickým významom pre ľudí, sociálnu triedu alebo politickú stranu.


Hoci váčsina pamätníkov, ktorými sa tu autor zaobéra, je konzervatívne estetické a politicky, nesúhlasí by s tým, že monumentálne metafory môžu byť všelícku chápáné ako „posvátné ikony” vždy pripravené na vyprázdnenie a znovuaplikovanie významom v závislosti na zmene sociálnych a politických pomier. Presvedčili sa o tom aj diváci filmu “Planéta opic”, ktorí sa identifikovali so šokom hlavneho predstaviteľa v momente, keď nahlé objavili novovykonanú Sochu Slobody. V skutočnosti, je to naša normálna vnútorná potreba zachovať pamätníky, ktoré nám dovolujú odsudit vandalizmus skupin, ktorých ideologické podstata. Schopnosť povznesť sa potom nad túžbu uchovávať a zúčastniť sa na kolektívnom vandalizme nepodpokladá, že sila predstav je nielen v ich formálnych vlastnostach a/alebo jednoduché reprezentácií, ale v ich utečovaní našej krehkej sociálnej identity.